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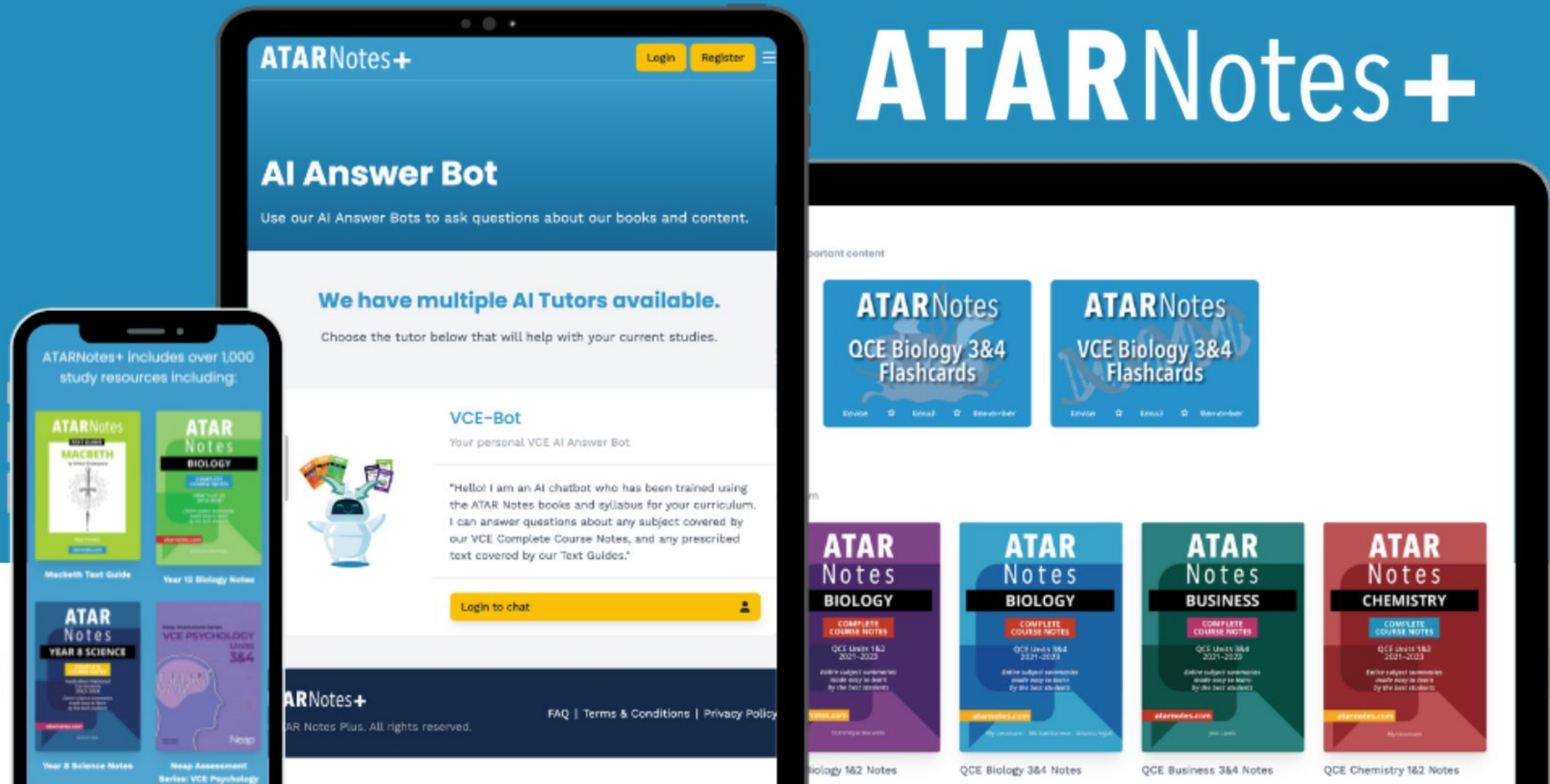
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How to Write the Perfect Essay

ATARNotes January Lecture Series

Presented by:
Maddie Pryde

- Introduction + Warm Up
- The golden element of an essay
- Structure, unpacked
- Common Essay Mistakes
- A look behind the curtain (Example!)
- Top Tips for Exam room writing



Overview

A bit about me!

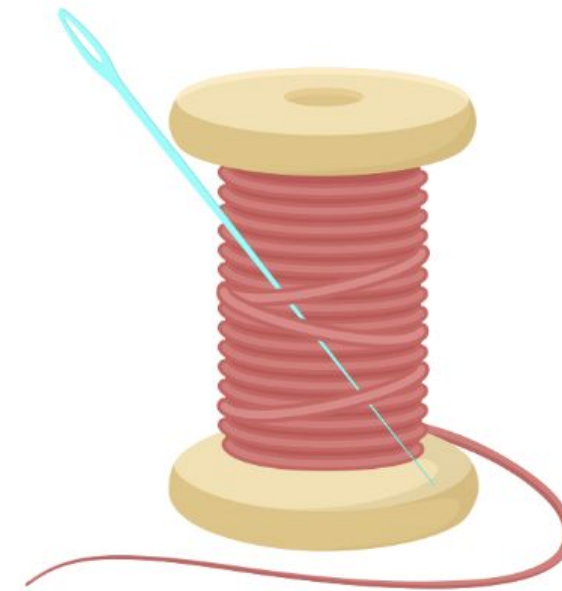
- Hi, I'm Maddie!
- I graduated from BGGs in 2020 with an ATAR of 97.65
- Favourite subjects in school were English, Literature and Modern History
- I'm studying a double degree in Communications and Arts at UQ
 - Majoring in International Relations / Peace & Conflict
- I've been tutoring and lecturing high school students for the past 3 years
- I love terrible movies (and reviewing them) and excellent bagels



Take a moment to write down what you think are the absolutely crucial elements to write a good essay!



- Spoiler Alert:
- The number one most crucial element of a good essay is a ***good thesis***.
- Without it you are stranded in a listless sea, with no land or boat in sight, and it will lead to countless problems in your essay that all the lovely analysis and paragraph connections and clever vocabulary won't be able to cover up.
- Your first port of call when you are faced with an essay question is come up with a strong thesis statement which can be built upon using evidence throughout the piece.



- What is a thesis?
 - A key statement or argument, both answers a prompt AND stakes what you believe and are going to prove.
- So what makes a good thesis?
 - The statement must be clear and direct, referred back to consistently throughout the essay, linked directly to all the evidence you use throughout your piece.



- What does a good thesis look like?
 - While Atwood's *Penelope* does gain some agency, ultimately she remains at the mercy of the male figures in her life.
 - Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* manipulates time in order to remind audiences of its powerful and pervasive nature.
 - Shaffer is wholly correct in his notion that Conrad manipulates language choices to strip away the veneer of imperialism and expose those that employ it.



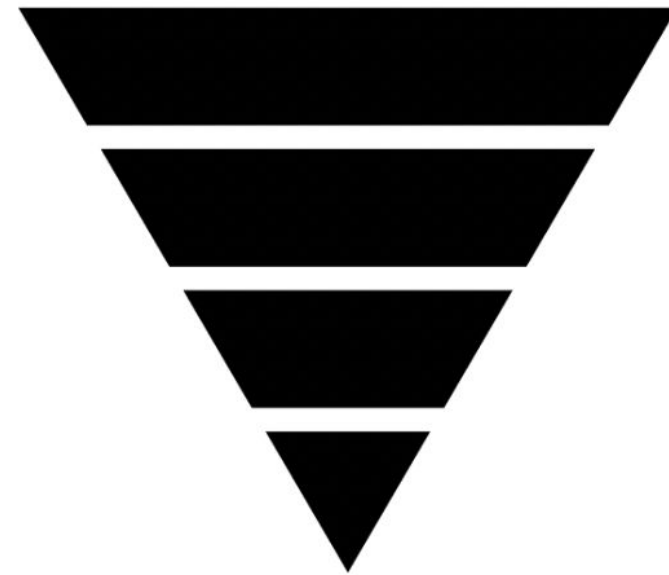
In 2019, the QCAA conducted some trial exams to get a sense of how students performed in External conditions. Their key findings were as follows:

- 1) Students with a clear and consistent thesis always did the best
- 2) Students need to demonstrate a deep understanding of the whole text
- 3) Students need to be constantly referring to audience positioning, drawing on cultural attitudes, values and beliefs



Introductions should be short and sweet, they are focused on introducing the broad themes and ideas that you will be discussing in the essay not by including evidence you plan on analysing.

Your intro should be structured around the concept of an inverted pyramid, moving from the broad to the specific.



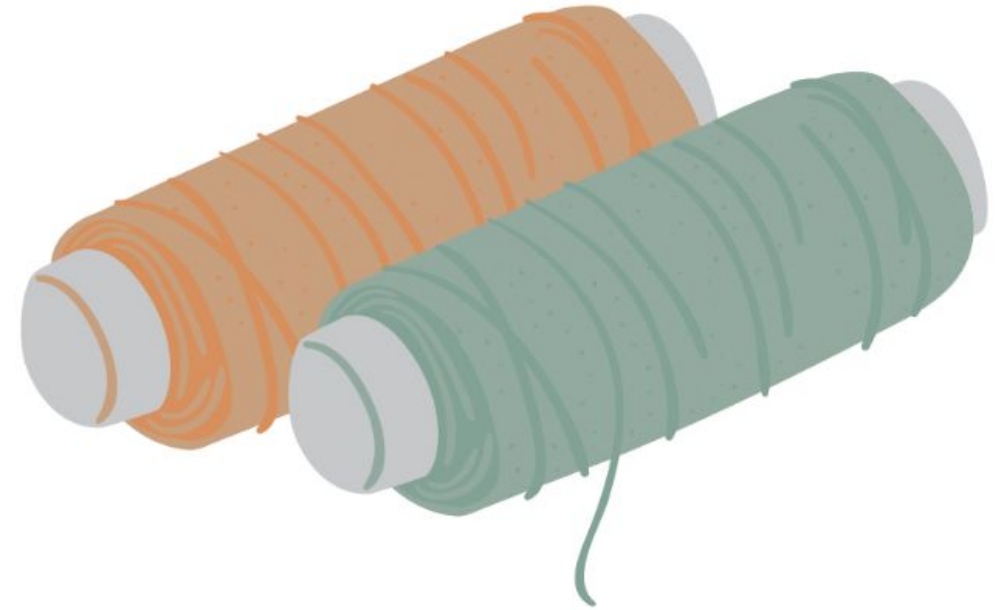
B1: Is the broad background of your essay and includes all of the most basic information on the text. This means title, author, publication date, and simplest synopsis you can write.

B2: Introduces more specific details of the text, and 'zooms in' on the themes/characters that you will be writing about in your essay.

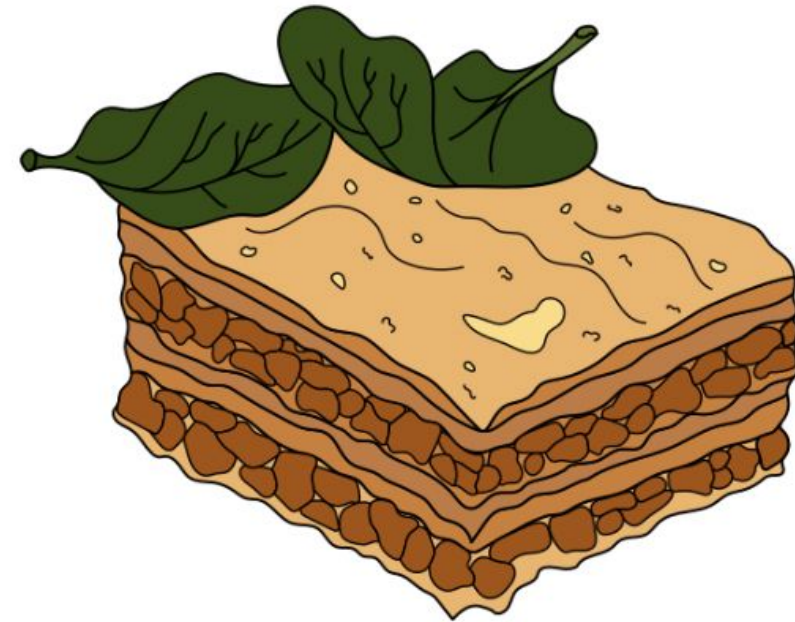


Argument: Next is your thesis, which we have already discussed. Remember that it needs to directly answer the question/prompt!

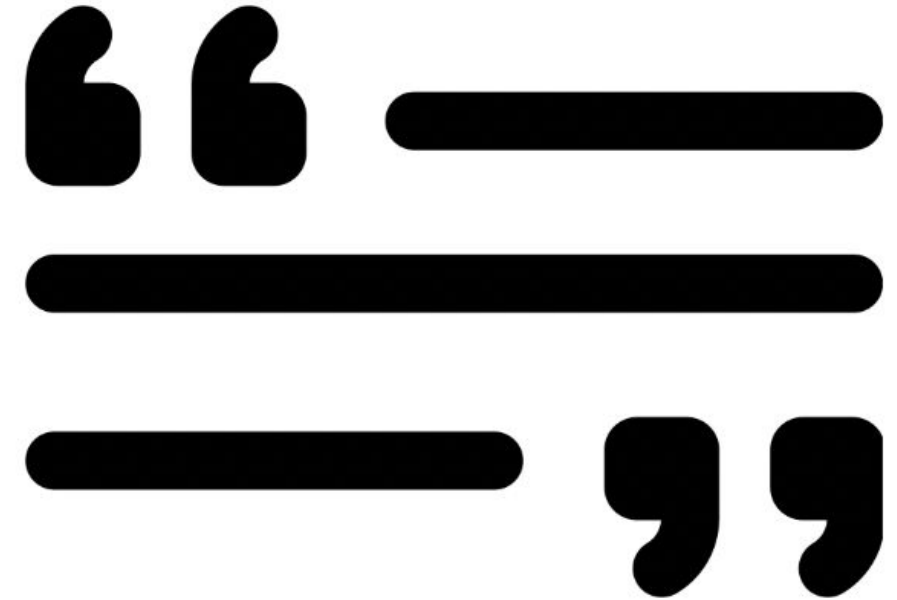
Preview: The final element of the introduction is a preview of the points you will be arguing in your body paragraphs. You're not introducing evidence, just the broad ideas.



Your body paragraphs are the meat and potatoes of the essay, and include most of the important information, including all of your analysis. These are the only elements of the essay that should include explicit evidence!



Topic Sentence: Your topic sentence outlines what will be included in your paragraph - it should include both your paragraph specific point and a reference to your thesis also



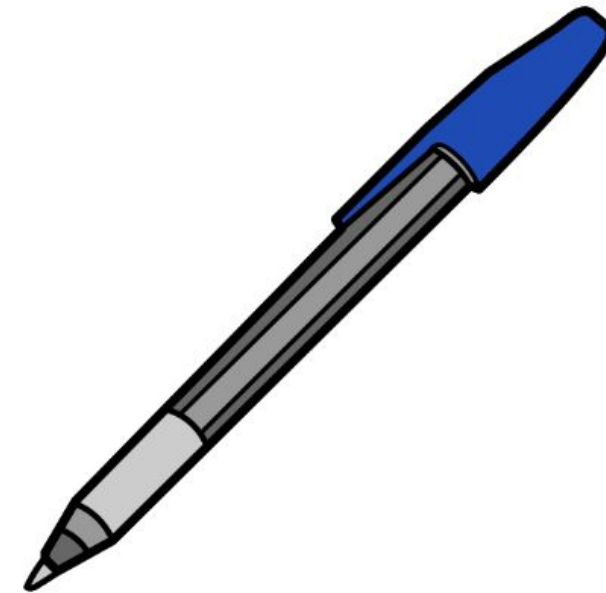
Within your paragraphs you should be using only 2-3 pieces of evidence. The more evidence you use, the less space you have to analyse them. The following structure is how to step through your analysis well to ensure that you are including all elements asked for in the criteria.



What? → So what? → So how? → So now...

What = Refers to your evidence, it needs to be contextualised based on the events that have occurred around it in the text, not using page/act/scene numbers

So What = Is your analysis, peeling back the layers and indicating how the author has used aesthetic features and stylistic devices to send certain messages.

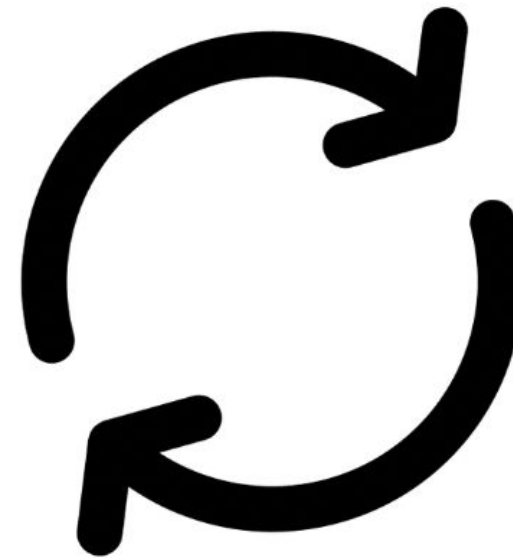


So how = Asks you to determine how audiences of the text are positioned to respond based on the findings of your analysis. This should include traditional audiences (the audience the text was written for) and contemporary audiences (the audience today, us).
So now = This is where you link back to your thesis statement. This is paramount to doing well with an essay, and indicates that you are building upon that thesis and prioritising cohesion!



This structure should be repeated for every new piece of evidence you introduce - this could mean the structure is used 2 or 3 times in each body paragraph. It is super helpful tool to be using as you plan your essay, both outside and inside exam conditions.

It also is an excellent yardstick to determine if you are including all the elements discussed in the criteria.

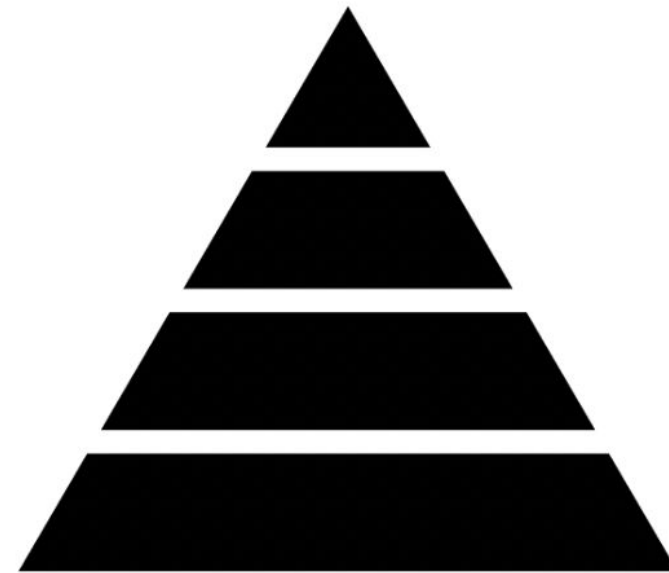


The final piece of the puzzle is the conclusion, and is often overlooked when pulling together an essay. It should not be a repeat of your introduction, nor should it be a romantic concluding statement that is ripe with cliché.



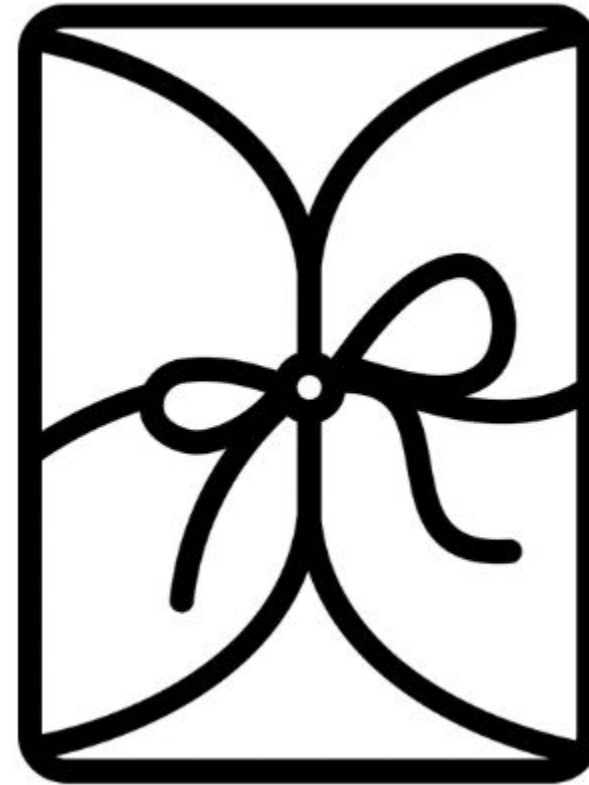
Unlike the introduction which is built like an inverted pyramid, this section of the essay should be the classic shape, starting specific and becoming more broad.

Thesis: Your conclusion begins with a restatement of your thesis, but not as it was presented in your introduction. It should be worded as though proven correct!



Points: You need to recount your body points, but in more detail than just what was included in your topic sentences. The purpose of these sentences is to indicate that your thesis and evidence in conjunction have worked together to prove an overall point.

Broad statement on text: The final sentence of your conclusion acts to make a comment on the broader purpose and themes of the text, beyond what you explored in your essay.



SPENDING TOO MUCH TIME ON ANALYSIS

When students see the name 'analytical essay' they begin to panic and start analysing as much as they can, as fast as they can.

Analysis is undoubtedly a vital element of a good essay, but it is important to remember that your analysis is just one piece in a bigger puzzle, and it should be used to prove a point rather than to exist for its own sake. As indicated in the structure for your body paragraphs (→) everything needs to flow.



NEGLECTING AUDIENCE POSITIONING

Linked to the previous point, a focus on analysis means that many students neglect unpacking what this analysis means for the positioning of audiences. You need to consider how the cultural assumptions, attitudes, values and beliefs of the audience provoke them to feel/react to the author's choices.



JUMPING AROUND OR RABBIT HOLING

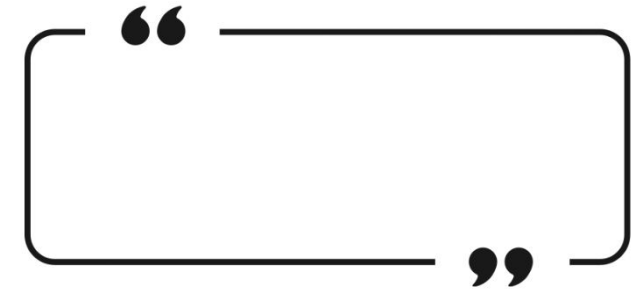
It is imperative that your essay maintains a strong line of argument throughout. Every piece of evidence you introduce, every sentence of analysis needs to be focused on arguing ONE explicit line of reasoning. When you have the luxury of being outside of exam conditions, read your work ALOUD when proofreading to ensure you aren't deviating off-track. Using the structure introduced earlier will also be useful to keep on track as you are writing



FORGETTING THE TITLE

It may seem like a very minor detail, but forgetting a title is an easy way to lose marks on important essays.

Quote: Exploring (insert key theme/character/relationship etc) in (insert author's last name)'s (insert text name)



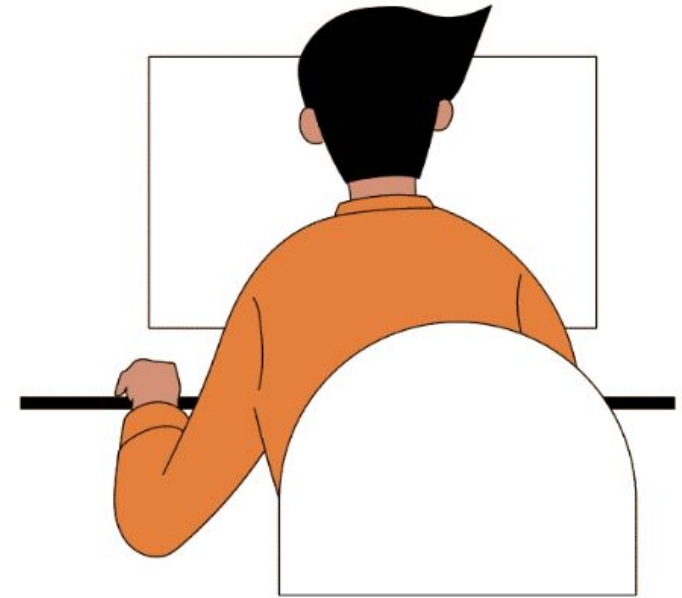
“Get thee to a nunnery”: Exploring gender discrimination in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

“When vegetation rioted on the earth”: Exploring nature symbolism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*

“Dirty Girls”: Exploring the role of The Maids in Atwood’s *Penelopiad*

NOT EDITING

When you're finished writing an essay (whether in an exam room or out of it) it can be tempting to hand it in and run for your life, just so you never have to think about it again. But failing to proofread means that students who are otherwise confident in their abilities, lose marks over tiny details like a stray comma.



PART ONE - STYLE

Is every sentence clear and easy to understand? Are sentences and paragraphs cohesive? Is your writing primarily inactive rather than passive voice? Are you rambling or sticking to my key point/argument? Is my tone appropriate? Too academic? Too casual? Is there variety in the length of your sentences? Is my writing economical or are you wasting words?



PART TWO - GRAMMAR

Are all your sentences complete? Any accidental fragments? Any accidental run-ons? Is your tense consistent throughout the piece? Is it clear what pronouns in your writing are referring to? Have you read through all your sentences to ensure they sound correct?



PART THREE - WORD CHOICE

Do you use the precise word every time? Are you sure of the definitions of the words you've used? Can you replace any word with one that is more precise or clear? Are you aware of the connotations of the words you have used? Have you left out any words you meant to include? Have you included words you meant to delete? Have you avoided cliches and overused expressions?



PART FOUR - FORMATTING

Have you spelled every word correctly? Does every sentence end with a full stop, question mark or exclamation mark? Have you used commas correctly? Have you correctly formatted your quotations and evidence? Have you avoided conjunctions if not appropriate for the tone? Have you skipped a line to indicate a new paragraph? If you line spacing, font choice and font size consistent? Do I have a title?



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Example!

In the next section we are going to have a read through of a high scoring example and note what about it makes it worthy of its mark!

Remember that there is more than one way to write a good essay beyond the simplest of rules. This is both the beauty and the frustration of English (and English subjects) - anything can be considered 'right' or 'correct' if you can argue its correctness.



Disguise is used by Shakespeare to comment on the manipulation of truth in *The Winter's Tale*. To what extent do you agree?

The Winter's Tale (1611) is one of William Shakespeare's (1) final plays, and one of his most unique. Torn into two separate halves by a revolutionary 16 year time-jump, Shakespeare offers a fresh look at classic questions of fidelity and loyalty through a lens of truth and perception. As such, Shakespeare manipulates the recurring symbolism of disguise to offer comment on truth as only ever temporarily hidden. He does so by manipulating language of appearance and likeness in the plays opening half, and language of disguise in the latter half.

1. Your initial introduction of the author is the only time you should mention their first name - from then on, William is simply Shakespeare.

Disguise is used by Shakespeare to comment on the manipulation of truth in *The Winter's Tale*. To what extent do you agree?

In the opening acts of the play, Shakespeare manipulates language surrounding appearance to suggest that while one might be able to change disguise, faces will reveal the truth. To reassure himself of the legitimacy of his son, King Leontes searches for his own likeness in the face of his young son, Mamillius, "What, hast smutched thy nose? They say it is a copy out of mine." Shakespeare's use of Mamillius and Leontes' shared nose is two-fold. Firstly, (2) it demonstrates the two are truly related, as traditional audiences would understand that physical likeness was the only indication two people were related at the time of the play's writing. Secondly, Shakespeare suggests that it is not merely the shape of the nose that they share, but its dirtiness also. Leontes fails to keep his nose clean by delving restlessly into the intricacies of Polixenes and Hermione's relationship (3), and he is so eager to find betrayal that his nose has become dirtied by his actions.

2. Sign positing simple but effective way of unpacking complex analysis without letting your reader get confused. It allows you to be succinct while also delving into depth!

3. It is important to keep in mind that when you write your piece, you are assuming that the reader has passable knowledge of the text. The know the characters and basic plot, it is your job to take them below the immediate surface level of understanding. So while I don't have to introduce and explain who Polixenes and Hermione are, I do have to demonstrate why Leontes' distrust of their platonic relationship is indicative of a much darker problem. Assume that you are much smarter than the person reading.

Disguise is used by Shakespeare to comment on the manipulation of truth in *The Winter's Tale*. To what extent do you agree?

As such, audiences are positioned to see that the truth of filial relation and evil action can be found within a character's face. All the more, when Polixenes is deciding to trust Camillo about the supposed threat in the Bohemian King's life, he declares, "I do believe thee; I saw this fear in face." Despite Camillo's clear loyalty to the crown of Sicilia, Polixenes can determine the truth from the man's face. In seeing that truth, and acknowledging its presence, he thereby saves himself from the fury of King Leontes. Even in the midst of that fury, Leontes admits that Hermione has a "free face", which he will come to learn reflects the ultimate truth of her innocence. He thereby juxtaposes Polixenes - by denying the truth clearly displayed on the face, Shakespeare punishes him.

Disguise is used by Shakespeare to comment on the manipulation of truth in *The Winter's Tale*. To what extent do you agree?

In the play's second half, Shakespeare manipulates the language of theatre and to suggest that disguises act only to hide truth temporarily, and that reality can still shine through. Upon Polixenes' discovery of Perdita and Florizel and his subsequent threats towards them, Camillo urges the young couple to disguise themselves and flee to the safe haven of Sicilia. Understanding the gravity of the situation, Perdita admits, "I see the play so lies that I must bear a part." She knows that for the sake of the very survival of her and her lover, she must become disguised, by Shakespeare's use of the word 'part' is indicative of the fleeting effectiveness of hiding the truth. As an actor might paint their face with stage makeup, the young couple hide their identities, knowing full well that the disguise will eventually be washed from their skin. Indeed, disguise can be an ill fitting costume, as depicted in the previous scene, where Polixenes notes of Perdita that, "Nothing she does or seems but smacks of something greater than herself, too noble for this place." (4) Despite the development of her disguise over all 16 of her years in Bohemia, the truth of her heritage is too pervasive, and the truth can be seen peeking from beneath an ill fitting disguise of lowliness. As a result, audiences are positioned to view truth as strong enough to be glimpsed from underneath disguise, and to trust that all will be revealed in due course.

4. Within analytical essay criteria, you are often asked to demonstrate a deep and broad understanding of a text. This means that you need to see connections between separate plot points that occur perhaps at opposite ends of the story. By bolstering one piece of evidence by something that happened earlier, you indicate to markers you have interacted with the text deeply. This will get you marks 100% of the time.

Disguise is used by Shakespeare to comment on the manipulation of truth in *The Winter's Tale*. To what extent do you agree?

Truth as a theme of *The Winter's Tale* is depicted as intrinsic to a character's identity, despite any attempts to mask it. In the first half of the play, the truth of a character's heritage or actions are revealed through the language of appearance, and what can be immediately observed within their face. In the second half, Shakespeare elicits the imagery of theatre costume to detail the ill-fitting nature of disguise when the truth will inevitably be revealed to the audience. In turn, Shakespeare's audience must be mindful that characters do not possess the ability to entirely change their nature in order to fool those around them, lest they lose the truth intrinsic to who they are.

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Top Tips for Exam Essay Writing

⚠ Remember, 30 mins before the exam, you've done everything you can to prepare ⚠ - Breathe, check you have all the correct tools, and look forward to being done!

Eat breakfast, even if you're feeling the nerves and not very hungry. It is super important your brain has the fuel it needs to solve problems and write essays. Be sure to fill out all the details on the front of your exam very carefully. The last thing you want is to lose any marks (or not have it marked at all!) because you forgot to write your name or you forgot to indicate which essay question you were answering!



If you're writing an essay in exam conditions, use planning time to;

Write out a thesis/argument

Decide your key points/paragraphs

**Write down all the evidence you are going to use
(this is especially important if your evidence is memorised, we want to free up brain space to write during the actual exam time!)**



If you're tackling an exam, use planning time to ;
Carefully read through all the questions on the paper

Note how many questions the paper contains
(check all the pages front and back to ensure you have them all!)

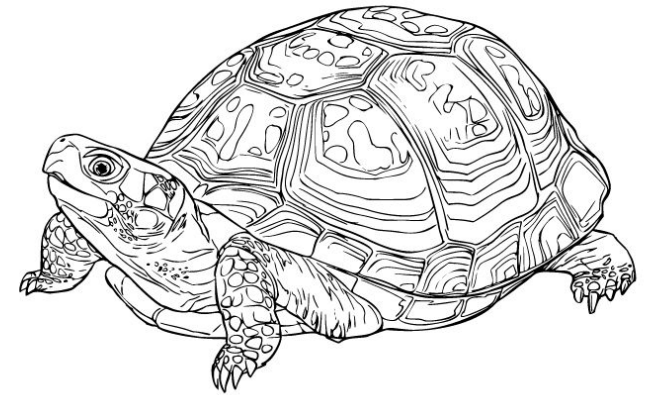
Have a plan of attack on what order you will complete the exam (Bust through multi-choice? Take on the hardest question? Answer the easiest first?)



During the exam;
Even if you read the questions during planning time,
read them AGAIN and read them CAREFULLY. You
want to be sure what the question is asking you
before you put in a bunch of time and effort into
answering it. Perhaps spend some time highlighting
the key information in the question!



During the exam;
If you don't know how to answer a question, or you're halfway through and don't know how to precede, don't panic. Move onto another question, and return later with fresher eyes. This goes for essays in exam conditions too! Leave some blank lines and write another section of the essay until you can return later.



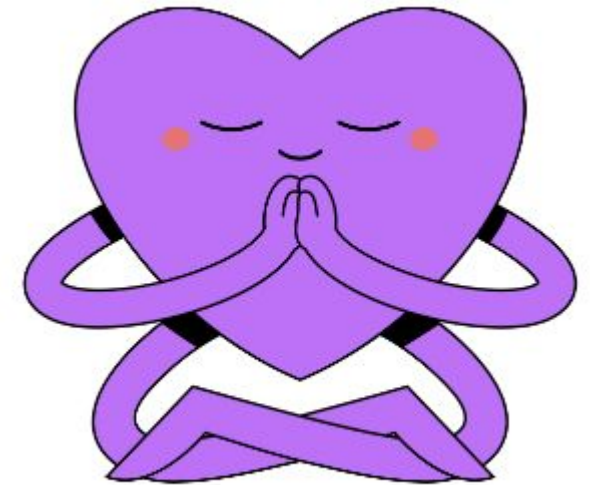
During the exam;

If you have time at the end of the exam, go back over ALL your work and check it carefully. Make sure you have the details in your working that the questions asks for (have you rounded to the correct number of decimal places?), you start all your paragraphs with a topic sentence and that all the basic spelling and grammar is **FLAWLESS**. There is nothing more frustrating than losing marks over silly details.



During the exam;

If you are feeling stuck, panicked or overwhelmed, take a moment to pause and breathe. Put the pen down, close your eyes and take a steady slow breath in through your nose and out through your mouth. Taking a minute to calm your mind is NOT time wasted.



1. Always, always, always plan your essays. A Lot of students think they can get away with smashing out an essay off the top of their head, but this often results in clunky writing that drifts from the overall argument or thesis. Be sure to take all the time you need to write out a full plan (this should include your thesis, topic sentences, segues and evidence) before you start writing, even in exam conditions. Having a plan beside you helps fend off writer's block and ensures you are not trying to hold memorised information in your head as you synthesis arguments into sentences
2. Always refer to back to how the text's audience is being positioned. It is super important to note not only how the text is sharing a message, but also how that message is being interpreted. This means you should refer to both traditional and contemporary audiences in your work to demonstrate how meaning has changed over time.
3. Don't be afraid to write simple sentences. My golden rule for analytical writing is clarity > complexity. You can use the fanciest language in the world, but if your marker cannot make your argument out, you won't be marked highly. Having a clear thesis throughout your piece should always be your priority.
4. If you don't know what to write next, leave a gap and come back to it.
5. When you finish writing, EDIT YOUR WORK. This is nothing more frustrating than having an amazing essay and getting marked down for something as small as grammar or spelling. I know it's so tempting to finish an essay and run from an exam room so you don't have to think about it again - take 10 minutes and read through it carefully, ensuring everything makes sense. Then you can rid yourself of it forever!

Thank You!

Thank you so much for joining me for the session today!

I hope you have gotten some tools and tricks you can use when you are writing your next essay. We hope to see more of you at ATARNotes.com and at our socials on Instagram, Facebook and Youtube.

Best of luck with everything on the horizon, you'll smash it!

Thank you again!

:D